

9 out of 10 agree: Rooney's wrong

By Paul McNamara

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As you can see from [Andy Rooney's letter](#), newspaper columnists are very good at insulting people. They are, however, lousy when it comes to admitting mistakes.

Andy Rooney made a mistake. He refuses to accept that judgment from some "junior reporter" up in Massachusetts, so perhaps he'll be more receptive to the opinions of 10 reputable news professionals I asked to referee.

Nine out of 10 believe Rooney is wrong.

For those who have been tied up following trivial stuff like the Thomas and Gates confirmations, here's what Rooney did: On Friday, Aug. 30, he sent the News a [column](#) that was to be published on Thursday, Sept. 5. This was the third paragraph:

"Driving to work the day after Labor Day, I passed a grade school just before 9 o'clock. Mothers were hand-holding their children to the door. My mind went into fast rewind. You don't forget your first school days."

[My beef](#) is that Rooney described a particular scene at a particular school on a particular day at a particular time. And, he did all of this four days *before* any of it could have happened.

That's not a crime, but it's wrong.

Rooney disagrees, so let's turn to the guest referees. Because I'm such a good sport, we'll hear first from Rooney's sole supporter.

- George Esper, veteran Associated Press war correspondent: "I probably could live with (Rooney's paragraph). It's not war, or manufacturing quotes, or anything like that. ... Nobody was hurt." Esper spoke glowingly about both Rooney the journalist and Rooney the man. He added, however, "I probably wouldn't write it the same way myself."

Now for my side:

- Jeff Greenfield, ABC News correspondent whose nationally syndicated columns appears frequently on this page: "To me, we're not talking about a mortal sin here. ... I love Andy Rooney; I think that he is a national resource; but in this case he's wrong. ... There's a first, basic rule: You don't say something happened when it didn't happen."
- Katherine Fanning, former editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*, who teaches a course in ethics in journalism at Boston University: "That's not being square with your readers ... it's ethically wrong. There are degrees of ethical lapse and in this case there was no great harm

done, except that the credibility of the press rests on the credibility” of individual details. Borrowing a phrase, Fanning said Rooney had committed “a journalistic misdemeanor.”

- Gordon McKibben, *Boston Globe* ombudsman: “It’s certainly careless; whether it’s malicious I don’t know.” Had McKibben been editing the column and knew of the liberty Rooney had taken, he “would have shouted across the room and said, ‘What gives?’”
- Rachelle Cohen, *Boston Herald* editorial page editor: “That’s really stupid! ... If one of my guys had tried something like that I would have read them the riot act.” Rooney didn’t have to do what he did, Cohen said. “He could have phrased that a hundred different ways.”
- Bill Ketter, editor of the *Patriot Ledger* of Quincy, when asked if he would allow Rooney, or any writer, to take such a liberty: “Me? Of course not. You don’t describe a situation – even in a column – unless it’s something you’ve actually seen.”
- LaRue Gilleland, director of the School of Journalism at Northeastern University (my alma mater): “When reporters and editors cut corners with the truth, the difference between what they do and [what Janet Cooke did](#) is but a matter of degree.”
- David Anable, chairman of the Boston University School of Journalism, asked if he would side with Rooney: “No, because he is pretending to the reader that what he described actually happened, when he is, in fact, inventing. ... Any normal reader would assume that was actual reporting.” Anable also mentioned Janet Cooke.
- Mike Short, Boston bureau chief for the Associated Press, said it was wrong of Rooney “to give the impression” that his column was written after school had opened: “You cannot take too many steps to play fair with the reader.”
- Loren Ghiglione, editor of *The News* of Southbridge and past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors: “He didn’t really need to lie. He could have said the same thing differently and not raised the question that you’re raising.”

He *should* have said the same thing differently.

Enough from journalists. Rooney writes in his column: “... let the readers decide.”

Good suggestion.

Readers: Feel free to let us know what you think.